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Viewing cable 06BOGOTA3258, JURY STILL OUT ON PARAMILITARY INFLUENCE IN MARCH

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
06BOGOTA3258	2006-04-11 22:09	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy Bogota

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PP RUEHWEB

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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4071
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SUBJECT: JURY STILL OUT ON PARAMILITARY INFLUENCE IN MARCH
12 ELECTIONS AND NEXT CONGRESS

REF: A. BOGOTA 2658

B. BOGOTA 2295

C. 05 BOGOTA 5619

Classified By: Ambassador William B. Wood, Reasons: 1.4 B & D.

1. (C) Summary: Opinions continue to vary on the potential of paramilitary influence in the Congress following the March 12 elections. Some commentators point to the defeat of the three most blatantly pro-AUC members of Congress (MOCs) as evidence of the erosion of para political influence. The Director of the Department of Administrative Security (DAS) estimates that 13 individuals directly linked to the AUC attained Congressional seats (out of 268 total seats). Nevertheless, the picture remains blurry. Several sitting MOCs expelled from two major pro-Uribe parties for alleged AUC ties were reelected. Four smaller parties (two publicly pro-Uribe) generally viewed as "sympathetic" to para interests attained 1.25 million votes for Senate. Vicente Castano's statement that the AUC controlled of 35 percent of this Congress was never really accurate, and should not be used for comparison (see Ref C). Once municipal level numbers are available, we will provide additional observations, including the prevalence of extremely high votes for one candidate (a possible sign of vote coercion and/or buying). End Summary.

ARGUING FOR DECLINE

2. (C) Numerous commentators and national press have stated that the level of AUC influence in the next Congress (taking office July 20) will decline, as the three vocally pro-AUC MOCs -- Carlos Moreno de Caro, Rocio Arias, and Eleonora Pineda -- failed to win reelection (or, in the case of Arias, move from House to Senate). In addition, Conservative Rep. Muriel Benitobollo of conflictive Sucre Department, subject of numerous accusations of AUC ties in major media and reportedly in the sights of the Prosecutor General's Office (Fiscalia), was defeated.

3. (C) Department of Administrative Security (DAS, rough FBI equivalent) Director Andres Penate told PolCouns that his institution considered 50 Congressional candidates (out of some 2700 total) as directly linked to the AUC, FARC, or narcotraffickers (but predominantly the former). Of those 50, according to Penate, 17 were elected, with 13 linked to the AUC. Penate offered three criteria for DAS determination of ties to illegal armed groups:

--Financing of campaigns (HUMINT sources);
--Secret meetings/encounters (limited to unusual times, say after midnight); and/or
--Direct solicitation of votes via bribery or intimidation.

Penate said DAS investigations found that all three groups tended to target MOCs for business reasons (almost like a "business plan") or when they move from the House to the Senate and require additional resources for a national campaign.

AND YET ...

4. (C) Others note that Moreno de Caro and Arias, who ran under the former's party label (Let Moreno Play), fared reasonably well with the electorate, attaining roughly 145,000 votes nationwide, enough votes to have gained a seat if they had been affiliated with a party that met vote threshold requirements. In addition, four of the five individuals (Sens. Habib Merheg, Dieb Maloof, and Luis Carlos Vives, and Rep. Jorge Caballero) expelled from the pro-Uribe National Unity (U) and Radical Change (CR) parties for alleged AUC ties attained seats. Hector Lopez, son of jailed

AUC-linked lottery baroness "La Gata," easily won a House seat from Bolivar Department under the little-known "Liberal Opening" party banner. Newcomer Citizen Convergence Party, whose suspicious finances came under scrutiny based on public criticism from President Uribe himself, attained some 590,000 Senate votes, resulting in seven Senate and eight House seats.

15. (C) XXXXXXXXXXXX a leading expert on paramilitary issues, told poloff AUC influence in Congress remained roughly unchanged, in spite of the defeat of Moreno, Arias, and Pineda. She suggested that AUC commander alias "Jorge 40" was a clear winner, having attained victory for his preferred candidates from Atlantico, Bolivar, Cesar, and Magdalena Departments. These included the four winners listed in para 4 above. (Comment: While the U and CR parties did not state so publicly, the expulsions stemmed from GOC intelligence that the individuals had met secretly with Jorge 40 in late 2005. End Comment.) She admitted to poloff that statistical comparison of 2002 and 2006 voting was not yet possible, owing to the unavailability of municipal level results. Those results, according to XXXXXXXXXXXX, would demonstrate the prevalence of 70 plus percent voting in favor of a candidate. She claimed this would be a tell-tale indicator of AUC influence in a particular race.

16. (C) The views of long-standing Congressional contact and former Senate president Carlos Garcia (U) are emblematic of the fact that everyone has opinions but the evidence is harder to come by. He recently told poloff that his party had no hard AUC linkage evidence to support the expulsions of Merheg, Maloof, and Vives. Furthermore, in Garcia's opinion, four of the U's 20 elected Senators -- Zulema Jattin, Jairo Merlano, Mauricio Pimiento, and Piedad Zuccardi -- do have clear ties to the AUC. According to Penate, the DAS lacks evidence against the four U members, but does have the dirt on Maloof (and former CR member Caballero).

COMMENT

17. (C) How many actual members of Congress are sympathetic to local or national para interests remains unclear. As Ref C detailed, the AUC's rumored 35 percent "control" of the current Congress was not factual and should not be used as a basis for comparison. The number of votes attained by the AUC-sympathetic parties, however, suggest that the paras or candidates whose thinking parallels that of the paramilitaries continue to maintain a level of influence in certain areas of the country, particularly along the Atlantic Coast. Once municipal-level voting numbers are available, we will offer additional views on this complicated subject.
WOOD